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5 moments from Katie Brennan's hearing on sexual assault that could hurt Gov. Murphy

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Gov. **Phil Murphy**'s young administration was the subject of four hours of unflattering and potentially damaging testimony Tuesday, as **a state official recounted** how the man she accused of raping her was hired and then remained in a key Murphy administration job for months even though she alerted the governor's team multiple times of the allegations.

Katie Brennan, chief of staff of the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, told a special state legislative committee in Trenton she felt repeatedly ignored as she told Murphy aides three times about her accusations against Albert J. Alvarez over the last year.

Alvarez did not resign from his job as chief of staff of the New Jersey Schools Development Authority until October, and that was when a newspaper contacted him about the accusations. Alvarez was never charged by law enforcement in the matter and denies the claims.

The dramatic day at the Statehouse left a few lingering questions. Chief among them: How much will this hurt Murphy?

Here are some of the day's most dramatic moments and how they could affect the rookie Democratic governor:

1. She accused Murphy's team of putting politics over a rape victim.

Brennan all but said Murphy's team didn't do anything to punish Alvarez or properly address her allegations until it was politically expedient for the governor.

"I had access to people in the highest positions of power in the State of New Jersey," she told lawmakers during her testimony, which was under oath. "At each turn, my pleas for help went unanswered. Somehow, it wasn't a priority to address my sexual assault ... until it impacted them."

Brennan said Alvarez raped her after a Murphy campaign event last April when she was a Murphy supporter and he was the campaign's director of Latino and Muslim outreach.



Brennan recalled how she quickly reported the alleged assault to police and the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office. After being shocked to learn in December that no charges would be filed, Brennan said, she reported her claims to Murphy's transition team before the governor took office.

She said she reported it again to Murphy's administration in March after Murphy was sworn in. And then, Brennan said, she emailed Murphy and his wife, First Lady Tammy Murphy, seeking a meeting in June.

All the while, Alvarez continued to hold his position in the administration.

Brennan said the first bit of justice she felt was when she took her story to the Wall Street Journal, which **published her account in October.**

"I and no survivor should have to tell their story to the newspaper to be heard," she said.

Murphy has said he personally didn't know about the accusations until Oct. 2, when Alvarez resigned. But the governor said while his staff followed protocol, Alvarez **should not have been hired.**

Murphy said in a statement Tuesday after Brennan's testimony that people should "stand with survivors of sexual assault, and we must start from a place of believing the accuser."

"She is right: No one should have to go through an ordeal to have their voices heard," Murphy said.

The chairs of the committee said they found Brennan to be honest, credible, and poised.

Carl Golden, a former press secretary for former Republican Govs. Tom Kean and Christie Whitman, said there seemed to be "a clear willingness to accept her version of events as what truly transpired."

2. Brennan recalled all the people she told in Murphy's team.

Brennan named four people in the administration whom she told about the alleged attack:

- Justin Braz, Murphy's deputy chief of staff for legislative affairs.
- Matt Platkin, Murphy's chief counsel.
- Parimal Garg, Murphy's deputy chief counsel.
- Heather Taylor, the chief ethics officer in Murphy's office.

Brennan also cited how the Wall Street Journal reported Pete Cammarano, who is now Murphy's chief of staff, was made aware of a sexual assault allegation about Alvarez, though it was not known Brennan was the acuser.

Brennan said none of them questioned her account and all expressed sympathy toward her.

She said she reached out to Braz, a friend who was starting to get involved with Murphy's campaign, soon after the incident because he knew Alvarez and she wanted to continue to pursue a career in housing and government in New Jersey.

"I needed support and protection," Brennan said.

She added that Braz kept the information private until she allowed him to take it to higher-ups in Murphy's orbit.

Brennan said she also reported the alleged assault to police, was examined for sexual assault at Jersey City Medical Center, wrote a letter to Alvarez recalling her account, and reported the alleged incident to the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office.

Eventually, Brennan began formally working for Murphy's campaign. And after Murphy was elected in November, Alvarez was named personnel director of Murphy's transition team.

In December, Brennan said, the prosecutor's office said it was close to wrapping up its case, and she believed that meant Alvarez would soon be charged. That's when she asked Braz to tell the transition about the allegations. She said he alerted the transition's counsel.

Then, Brennan learned the prosecutor's office would not bring charges -- news that left her with "hollowness" and "disappointment." She said she hoped for "justice in another form" through Murphy's team.

But Alvarez was hired for the schools authority job early this year after passing a background check, Murphy's staff has said. Brennan said she saw Alvarez numerous times at functions after that.

Brennan said she took her allegations to Platkin and Garg, the governor's counsel, in March. She said Platkin was "horrified" and Garg said he was sorry.

But in April, Brennan said, Taylor, the governor's ethics officer, informed her the state could not take action because neither Alvarez nor Brennan was employed by the state at the time of the alleged assault.

That, Brennan said, is when she personally emailed the Murphys. She told them she wanted to discuss a "sensitive matter" from during the campaign.

Murphy said he was "on it" and copied two administrative assistants on the email.

But no meeting was ever scheduled. Murphy has said he did not know the details of what Brennan wanted to discuss in her email and argued he doesn't have time to meet with everyone who reaches out.

Brennan said she ended up receiving a call from campaign attorney Jonathan Berkon, who told her Alvarez "was leaving the administration," even though she never mentioned Alvarez to him.

"Someone told him what the issue was," Brennan said.

Brennan said Berkon later followed up and said he could not tell them why Alvarez was leaving because it was "an HR matter."

Alvarez remained on the job for several months after that. In September, Brennan contacted the Wall Street Journal.

State Assemblywoman Eliana Pintor Marin, one of the panel's co-chairs, said she was struck by the number of people who knew about Brennan's allegations.

"I'm sure they tried to do something," Pintor Marin, D-Essex, told reporters after the hearing. "I know how many avenues they went through, how hard they tried to get this knowledge up the chain."

Golden, the former press secretary, said the "most damaging thing" to Murphy could be how Brennan did "everything she was supposed to do, all the way up to Murphy himself."

"And it was like throwing a rose petal into the Grand Canyon and waiting to hear the echo. Nothing happened," said Golden, who is now an analyst with the Hughes Center at Stockton University.

Golden said that "raises more questions" about who in the governor's office knew what and when and if anyone brought this to Murphy's attention.

"Those questions weren't answered," Golden said.

3. Brennan took a swing at Murphy's progressive image.



Murphy, who took over for Republican **Chris Christie** in January, has prided himself on being a progressive -- including being an advocate for women. His **first official action** as governor was to sign an executive order to support equal pay for women. Three months later, he helped give New Jersey **the strongest equal pay law in the country**.

But Brennan appeared to question how aligned Murphy is with liberal causes in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

"I was confident the administration would help me pursue justice and would protect me in my workplace," she said. "I thought that if any administration could make progressive reforms, it would be this one."

Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University, said this "raises questions about the sincerity of the governor's promises."

"He's got a lot on his plate, but this was something that really clashed with his message," Baker added.

Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, notes how this matter has surfaced while Murphy's fellow Democrats across the nation are "trying to take the high road" on issues related to #MeToo.

"Murphy has presented himself as really an exemplar on these types of issues," Murray said. "If there was a problem there or if the ball was dropped, it will affect him more once the public does start paying closer attention."

Murphy has stressed his goal now is to make New Jersey a national model for how officials respond to sexual assault victims.

He noted Tuesday how state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal has **developed new procedures** that law enforcement officials will use to make New Jersey's system more "victim-centric."

"I am committed to working with Attorney General Grewal and the whole of state government to ensure that New Jersey is a place where justice is the right of every person, and every person is treated with dignity and respect while seeking it," Murphy said in a statement.

4. Murphy's team said Alvarez passed a background check. Brennan said that's not good enough.

Murphy's staff has noted Alvarez was hired only after he a background check that showed he no arrests or criminal charges against him.

Brennan was asked by a lawmaker Tuesday if she believed employees should go through a background check that also includes alleged crimes being investigated and if they should not be hired until any investigations are over.

Brennan noted how so few cases of alleged rape go to trial and even fewer result in convictions.

"Because it's 'he said, she said,'" she added. "And if that's going to be the case and people are not going to be convicted, then there's not going to be something on their background check."

"If I told them that I was raped, then they know that. It's not a trial. It's a hiring process. And they chose to move forward," Brennan said. "I do think there's something we need to do to address that."



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5. Murphy could be called to testify.

The legislative committee investigating the administration has the authority to call anybody to appear before them -- anybody. That includes the governor himself.

And the committee's two chairwomen **didn't rule it out.**

"I don't think anything has been ruled out at this point," Pintor Marin told reporters after Tuesday's hearings.

The other co-chair, state Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, said she believed there "seemed to be a curious lack of asking about the details" among state officials.

But does she believe that includes the governor?

"We have not reached a conclusion of how far up this actually got," Weinberg, D-Bergen, said.



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"We don't know yet how this is going to play out. But it certainly is not starting out very well for him."

Murphy is still only 11 months into his first term, with one poll showing many people in the state still haven't formed an opinion about him.

At the same time, he's already making a national name for himself. This past Saturday, Murphy was **named vice chair of the Democratic Governors Association** and will become chair in 2020, which will put him in a prime job when his party tries to unseat President Donald Trump that year.

The Brennan case could hurt him on both fronts. But experts caution that it's still too early in this process to tell how much.

Ben Dworkin, director of Rowan University's Institute for Public Policy and Citizenship, said the "subject is so sensitive that it's very difficult for any person to make political predictions."

"It was compelling and frustrating and heartbreaking," Dworkin said. "But it was just the first day. We won't recognize all of the ripple effects and implications and ramifications of this investigation until much further down the road."

Murray, the Monmouth pollster, agreed, saying this is the first news many people are getting about this situation and that we still don't know exactly what happened after Brennan had these conversations with people in Murphy's administration.

"We don't know yet how this is going to play out," Murray said. "But it certainly is not starting out very well for him."

What happens next?

Leaders of the committee want Alvarez to testify. They said they have reached out to him and will know by Wednesday whether he agrees to appear.

The committee's next hearing is Dec. 18. The chairwomen said they have not yet decided who will be the next to testify.

Weinberg, the co-chairwoman, said one thing she's "not satisfied" with is why the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office declined to press charges.

"What were the factors? What was the evidence they had?" She asked.

The panel is also looking into not just how the Brennan allegations were handled but state hiring practices -- including Murphy's -- and how to improve New Jersey's laws and protocols for how sexual-assault allegations are handled.

Brennan called on lawmakers Tuesday to pass legislation to strengthen those laws, including removing a two-year statute of limitations on filing civil lawsuits in the state.

"We all have a lot of work to do," she said. "It's not about one bad actor. This isn't about one incident. This is about a pervasive culture of assault and violence. It is every person that looks the other way instead of acting."



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MORE COVERAGE OF BRENNAN'S TESTIMONY:

[Katie Brennan speaks for the first time publicly: 'My pleas went unanswered'](#)

[Phil Murphy may be called to testify before lawmakers investigating handling of sex assault allegations](#)

[After Katie Brennan says her 'pleas went unanswered' Murphy commends her 'bravery'](#)

[Here are Katie Brennan's full opening remarks on how Murphy administration handled her claim she was raped](#)

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